

John 12: 1-8 “Dinner With Jesus” Rev. Janet Chapman 4/6/25

Our story today is an odd story even for the Gospel of John. Jesus has arrived in Bethany, hard to do nowadays with the massive wall separating Israelis and Palestinians, and is being entertained by his good friends, sisters Mary and Martha. The Gospel author casually remarks that Lazarus, whom Jesus has just raised from the dead, is there at the table. Lazarus, *whom he has just raised from the dead* – seriously? Imagine being seated at the table as Martha says to you, “You know our rabbi Jesus, don’t you? And seated on your other side is our brother Lazarus, who died last week. Thanks to Jesus, he’s back among the living. Not even a lingering grave stench – please make yourself comfortable between them.” Settling in your seat, just trying to be polite, you ask the table companion to your left, “How’s your week been?” Your fellow dinner guest replies, “Well, I was sick unto death, my sisters were frantic with worry, then I died, was entombed for 3 days, wrapped up like a mummy. Jesus graciously stopped by my cemetery, shouted, ‘Lazarus come out!’ and raised me from the dead just in time for my sisters’ dinner party.” Speechless, you turn to the guest on your other side, “So how was your week?” The guest to your right responds, “Well, unfortunately, no sooner had I raised Lazarus, then my enemies vowed to kill me. I give myself no more than a couple weeks before they succeed.” And you wonder where you have landed? Welcome to the wonderfully weird world of the Gospel of John... welcome to the truth about what God in Jesus Christ is actively up to in our world. Here, Jesus joins us, and whenever Jesus shows up, hold onto your hat! Corpses rise from the dead and we are shocked that God is more active than we ever imagined. Will Willimon points out that John’s gospel is rich with mystery, almost too rich, for the reader. To get good news from this book, we have to willingly enter into a figurative world where few things are as they first appear. It takes work and imagination to fall in love with this Gospel because somehow John’s depiction of Jesus is both remote and odd as well as intimate and close at hand. With tons of symbols, metaphors, similes and images, our author teaches us how to gradually read the world as faithful people, sign by sign, that leads us into a reality we might have missed without John’s words.

So back to the dinner table. Mary and Martha have been preparing the meal, while earlier, Lazarus attempted to help but was still quite clumsy from his days in the tomb. He stared at a potato as if he had never seen one before and handled a small knife like a tree saw. Martha noticed and handed him a wooden spoon instead – his job was to stir when she said stir. He was unaware that a trade had occurred in his resurrection. Jesus had been safe as long as he stayed across the Jordan river, beyond the reach of his enemies in Jerusalem, but by returning to Bethany to save his friend, Jesus had signed his own death warrant. Unless Jesus could find a way to escape the net that was drawing in around him, he had traded his life for the life of his friend. Meanwhile, Mary slips away to find something in her room. Martha was used to it – Mary was the moody one, who disappeared sometimes even when she was sitting right there with everyone else. A certain look came over her face as if she were listening to something no one else could hear. No one noticed Mary had gone until she came back, holding a fancy clay jar in her hands. Without a word, she kneels at Jesus' feet and breaks open the jar, so that the smell of spikenard fills the room. Spikenard is part of the honeysuckle family grown primarily in the Himalaya mountains and it had a scent between mint and ginseng.

Barbara Brown Taylor says Mary then does several remarkable things in a row. First, she loosens her hair in a room full of men, which a respectable woman would never do in those days. Then she pours balm on Jesus' feet, which also wasn't done. The head, maybe, but not the feet which walked on dirt floors that would only soak up the ointment into the cracks. Then Mary touches Jesus, a single woman caressing the feet of a rabbi, also not done, even among the best of friends; and then she rubs the ointment into his feet with her hair, a totally bizarre and inexplicable act. Sometimes we confuse this account with the other three similar biblical stories in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In the first two, the woman is an unnamed woman at Simon the Leper's house who pours nard on Jesus' head, and in the third, she is a sinner, a woman of the night who washes his feet with her tears and covers them with kisses before rubbing them with the oil of myrrh, an antiseptic and analgesic, also brought to Jesus by the wise men and probably used to anoint his body after death. But only in John's story, does this woman have a name, Mary, and a relationship

with Jesus. She isn't a stranger or a sinner, but a longtime friend, which makes this act even more peculiar. Jesus knows she loves him and he loves her as well, so why this excessive move on her part?

She has gone overboard as Judas is quick to note. He challenges, "Why has this ointment not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?" A day laborer and his family could live a year on that much money, and here she has blown it on Jesus' feet, for God's sake. This argument grows old from stingy church folks who are always thinking of what someone else should be doing for the poor, when they themselves never give a dime. Jesus responds, "Leave her alone," (herein add the subtext "leave me alone as well") "she bought this ointment to prepare for my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you don't always have me." What an odd thing to say – here we have the champion of the poor, who regularly puts their needs above his own, suddenly pulling rank. But what we must understand is that it is all about timing. Jesus isn't saying that the poor don't matter, that we should accept poverty as inevitable and unfixable, but he is drawing us back to Deuteronomy 15:11 which says, "There will always be poor people – therefore I command you to be openhanded." In other words, the call to care for the poor is constant, it never ceases. Mary's lavish gift is about a moment in the salvation history of the world, the price of which is unquantifiable, it is priceless.

Also, it is in these very moments at the dinner table with Jesus that Mary accepts a new role. Because Jesus' time was running out, Mary's time has now come as prophet and lavish anointer of a soon-to-be-dead man. Jesus knew it was a message from God, not the hysterical actions of an old maid gone mad, but the careful act of a prophet. Her actions were no stranger than that of Ezekiel who ate the scroll of the Lord as a sign that he carried the word of God around inside of him; no weirder than that of Jeremiah who smashed the clay jar to show God's judgment; no more bizarre than Isaiah who walked around Jerusalem butt naked as an oracle against the nations. Where are we at this dinner table? We are in the presence of the Prophet Mary who is acting out just like other prophets before her. Prophets act out the truth that no one else can see, and we who observe them either write them off as crazy or fall silent before the disturbing news they bring from God.

There is a great deal of prophetic history in the walls of Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington D.C., who has hosted funerals for Rosa Parks and Frederick Douglas as well as welcomed American presidents and civil rights icons into its space. It made history again this past year thanks to a lawsuit against the far-right group called the Proud Boys who vandalized the church's property as well as destroyed Black Lives Matter signs there and at another historically black church. The pastor remarked, "The act of destroying these signs was not just alcohol-lubricated, infantile frat-boy stuff, it was a softer version of cross-burning, designed to keep us quiet." It was political intimidation, and the judge agreed by awarding the church \$2.8 million in damages, condemning the Proud Boys' "hateful and overtly racist conduct." In February, after the Proud Boys failed to pay, the court gave the church use of the group's name and symbols, making it possible for the church to seize the money Proud Boys make through merchandise sales. The congregation has begun to sell lookalike shirts on its website with lines like "Stay Proud. Stay Black" and plans to offer similar apparel for Pride Month and Juneteenth, with proceeds going to a community justice fund. The pastor responded, "It is our way of leveraging something that was intended for evil."

The prophet Mary leveraged in the same way, taking ointment intended for the rich alone, reserved for society's upper class, and lavished it upon Jesus in a beautiful expression of love. The air was dense with death at that table with Jesus, and while there may have been some doubt about whose death it was, Mary's prophetic act revealed the truth. There would be nothing economical about the death of this man, just as there was nothing economical about his life. In him, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made real. Mary makes the forecast that his death will be bad, but there will be no reason to lock up their hearts and run for the cellar. Whatever is needed, God will provide more than we can imagine... priceless gifts from our lavish Lord.